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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

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SUBJECT: MODERATE ISLAM - PROMOTING THE AMMAN MESSAGE, FOUR
YEARS LATER

REF: A. 07 AMMAN 3811

[1](#)B. 05 AMMAN 5456

[1](#)C. 04 AMMAN 9152

Classified By: Ambassador Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) Jordanian Islamic scholars, in close cooperation with the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, continue to propagate the themes of moderation and authentic Islam represented by the Amman Message and its sequel, the Amman Interfaith Message. The Amman Message seeks to promote moderate and authentic Islam by de-legitimizing the labeling of Muslims as apostates or non-believers; by recognizing the legitimacy of various schools of Islamic thought; and by affirming the notion that only qualified scholars from within the legitimate schools of thought may issue religious edicts.

The Aal al-Bayt Institute has taken a leading role in promoting the Amman Message and related efforts, by assisting Islamic scholars world-wide to promote moderate Islam and to use Islam and traditional Islamic sources to counter extremist ideology. The Institute has also worked to build ties with other religious groups. Through its publishing efforts, a Quranic studies website, and engagement with Christian churches, the Institute and its fellows are advancing the notion that Islam supports moderation and has common ground with Christianity, bases on which the two faiths can improve relations for the cause of peace and interfaith respect. A list of links associated with the Amman Message is included at the end of this cable. End Summary.

Institutionalizing the Message

[1](#)2. (SBU) Jordan maintains its active role in reinforcing moderate authentic Islam worldwide through the continuing propagation of the Amman Message, and by using the Royal-Court-based "Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought" to coordinate diverse efforts to promote moderate Islam and interfaith relations on a worldwide scale.

[1](#)3. (C) Several leaders of key Islamic institutions in Jordan, as well as authors of the Amman Message and related efforts, told Poloff that they are satisfied with the results of the Amman Message, but are still focused on expanding the message's impact and influence. In separate meetings, Jordan's Chief Islamic Justice Ahmad Hlayyel (the head of Jordan's Shari'a courts), Aal al-Bayt Institute Director Farouk Jarrar, and former President of Aal al-Bayt University (and current Secretary General of the Jeddah-based International Islamic Fiqh Academy) Dr. Abdul-Salam Al-Abbadi, all described the Amman Message as "nothing new" in terms of Islamic tradition or belief, but necessary in

order to rectify unsound ideas and misconceptions about Islam - among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The three interlocutors are all well-regarded Islamic figures in Jordan.

Revisiting the Amman Message

¶4. (SBU) BACKGROUND: The Amman Message was launched during a public announcement by Royal Court Imam Izzeddine Tamimi at the Al-Hashimiyeen mosque in Amman on the 27th night of Ramadan ("Laylat al-Qadr," the holiest night in the Islamic calendar) in November 2004 in the presence of King Abdullah (ref C). It was endorsed by a July 2005 International Islamic Conference hosted by King Abdullah which was attended by 200 leading scholars from 50 countries (ref B). The conference was intended to give the message more religious authority, and was preceded by King Abdullah forwarding 24 scholars three fundamental questions that led to affirming the key points of the message: Who is a Muslim? Is it permissible to declare someone an apostate or non-believer? and, Who has the right to issue fatwas? END BACKGROUND.

¶5. (SBU) The Jordanian Islamic thinkers all stressed to Poloff the three key points of the Amman Message: 1) it recognized the validity of eight schools of Islamic jurisprudence as well as of Sufi and Salafi thought; 2) "takfir," or the labeling of Muslims as non-Muslims or as apostates, is prohibited by Islam; and 3) fatwas can only be issued by competent authorities or licensed individuals based on the legitimate schools of jurisprudence.

¶6. (SBU) Several other important points are embedded in the message or expressed in interpretations of it, and were

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stressed by the Jordanian interlocutors: 1) it explicitly denounces terrorism on Islamic religious and moral grounds; 2) it implicitly provides Islamic justifications for a range of issues such as human rights, women's rights, religious freedoms, legitimate jihad under certain circumstances, just and democratic governance, and good citizenship of Muslims in non-Muslim countries; and 3) it stresses the importance of training Imams and other religious figures through the accepted methodologies of the "Madhahib," or established schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

¶7. (C) These key points from the Amman Message, according to Abbadi, have been incorporated into Jordanian Islamic textbooks used in the Jordanian state school system. Abbadi also said that other countries, including Qatar, are considering inclusion of the Amman message's precepts in their educational systems, although without the "Amman Message" label.

De-legitimizing Takfir

¶8. (SBU) The Amman Message's goal is to de-legitimize takfir by identifying as legitimate eight "Madhahib" or schools of jurisprudence: four main Sunni branches, two Shia schools, and the Ibadi (Oman) and Thahiri (a literalist school of theology) schools. Note: The Sunni schools of jurisprudence are: 1) Hanafi - Balkans, Turkey, Levant, Central Asia, Central and South Asia, 2) Maliki - North Africa, 3) Shafi'i - Egypt, Levant, Arabian Gulf, and 4) Hanbali - Arabia, Arabian Gulf. The Shia schools include the Ja'afari (Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Central Asia), and Zaydi (Yemen) schools. End note. The message also declares it illegitimate to brand those who follow the preceding eight Islamic schools of jurisprudence, or those practicing Tasawwuf (Sufism) or true Salafism (an offshoot of the Hanbali school in Arabia and the Gulf, sometimes imprecisely referred to as Wahabism), as apostates or non-believers. One goal of discrediting takfir is to increase intra-Muslim harmony, and to lessen some of the causes of Sunni-Shia

conflict.

¶9. (C) Since its launch, the Amman Message has received over 550 individual and organizational endorsements from 84 countries, from all major schools of Islamic thought, and was endorsed by the Organization of the Islamic Conference at its 2005 Mecca summit, though without the Amman Message label. Hlayyel, Al-Abbadi and Jarrar each encouraged measured support from the U.S. for the Amman Message. They say that those opposed to the Amman Message - the extremists of Al-Qaeda - are already opposed on the basis of their intellectually unsound interpretation of the faith, their takfirist thought, and their political aims. According to the religious leaders, U.S. recognition of the merits of the Amman Message, if done properly, could be of benefit in showing the Muslim world that the U.S. understands the difference between authentic but moderate Islam on the one hand, and the extremists on the other.

Aal al-Bayt Institute

¶10. (C) While the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought predates the Amman Message (it was established by King Hussein in 1980), it has taken a lead role in overseeing Jordanian efforts at supporting the message and related projects. The Institute's Acting Director, Farouk Jarrar, described the institute as like a "holding company," in that it supervises and coordinates related, yet independent entities as they work to further the goals of the Amman Message and of the Institute. The Institute, for instance, has ties to the English-language, high-quality glossy monthly magazine "Islamica," which is linked to the Amman Message websites and whose editor, Jordanian Sohail Nakhooda, has close working and personal relationships with the Institute.

¶11. (SBU) The Institute itself, which comprises offices, meeting rooms and a library, is located on the grounds of Raghadan Palace, the location of the official Royal Hashemite Court of Jordan, and is headed by Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Institute, who is a Special Advisor to his cousin King Abdullah (ref A).

¶12. (SBU) The Board of Trustees of the Institute includes the Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Abdul Fattah Salah, the Chief Shari'a Justice Ahmad Hlayyel, Grand Mufti Nuh Al-Qudah, the Minister of Education Tayseer Al-Nueimi, Armed Forces Mufti Brigadier General Abdulkarim al-Khasawneh, and former President of Aal al-Bayt University Abdul Salam Al-Abbadi (who became Secretary General of the Jeddah-based

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International Islamic Fiqh Academy in March 2008).

¶13. (SBU) The Institute's mission is to promote awareness of Islam and Islamic thought, rectify unsound ideas and misconceptions about Islam, foster cooperation between schools of Islamic jurisprudence, call for moderation and tolerance, and strengthen the intellectual links between Muslim scholars. The Institute has a lineup of distinguished fellows and Islamic thinkers from throughout the Muslim world. It publishes books through its Turab publishing house, and hosts and organizes international Islamic conferences and symposia.

¶14. (C) Jarrar told Poloff that according to a 2007 law governing the Institute, it was given the right to establish multi-faceted areas of programming to include a university, radio and television programming, a magazine, a newspaper, websites and a research center. The latter, the "Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center," is still in its early stages; its Director Aref Ali Nayad (cited in western media on his interfaith efforts with the Vatican) recently resigned, and the center's capability to offer programming partnerships or even physical and cyberspace is unclear.

¶15. (SBU) One area where the Institute is on the verge of a very big step forward is the founding of the World Islamic Sciences Education (WISE) University, set to start work in September 2008. Jarrar told Poloff that WISE will be formed from two colleges of Balqa' Applied University: its Usul ad-Din ("Principles of the Faith") and Islamic Arts colleges. He expects no fewer than 2000 students, and possibly as many as 3000, to enroll in WISE in September 2008. The goal of WISE, which will offer BA, MA, and Ph.D. programs, is to consolidate higher Islamic education in Jordan and attract students of Islamic sciences from throughout the world. Its curriculum will be based on the Amman Message principles of moderate, authentic Islam in the context of training Imams and other religious leaders correctly, a mutual goal of WISE and of the Amman Message. Jarrar did concede that defining the long-term role for WISE, given that Jordan's other universities also have robust Islamic sciences faculties/departments, was a challenge that had not been adequately thought out yet. He said Aal al-Bayt is contemplating some sort of consolidation or curriculum sharing among WISE and the various Islamic sciences faculties in the country.

Global Interfaith Efforts -----

¶16. (SBU) Following the Amman Message, King Abdullah launched the Amman Interfaith Message in 2005. During a tour of the United States, the King stressed that the purpose of the interfaith message was not merely to defuse tensions between Muslims, Christians and Jews, nor to promote tolerance between them, but to "establish full acceptance and goodwill between them."

¶17. (SBU) To advance this goal, Jordanian Islamic thinkers associated with the Aal al-Bayt Institute have taken leading roles in engaging the world's Christian leaders, in promoting a dialogue of faiths, and in building ties between Islam and Christianity with a view toward extending that effort to leaders of Judaism. One of the key such engagements came in the aftermath of Pope Benedict XVI's lecture at the University of Regensburg in Germany on September 12, 2006, in which the Pope quoted the views of a Byzantine emperor that Islam was "evil and inhuman," which sparked demonstrations in many parts of the Muslim world. The first reply came in the form of an October 13, 2006 published open letter to the Pope signed by 38 Muslim leaders, many of whom are fellows or otherwise associated with Aal al-Bayt. In it, the scholars refuted the sentiments of the quote cited by the Pope and, while accepting the Pope's clarifications regarding his disagreement with the Byzantine's sentiment, called for increased mutual acceptance and respect.

¶18. (SBU) The second major effort was also led by Aal al-Bayt fellows. The "A Common Word Between Us and You" document was published on October 13, 2007 as an open letter from Muslim leaders to the leaders of the major Christian churches and denominations, including the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, several orthodox Christian Patriarchs, and leaders of Christian churches worldwide. Finalized at a September 2007 conference in Jordan organized by the Aal al-Bayt Institute, "A Common Word" expanded on the message of the 2006 open letter, and used Biblical and Quranic teachings

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to highlight what the Muslim authors called "the foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbor." It was from this common ground from which the two faiths could advance their relations. The Common Word website notes that the document itself is an Aal al-Bayt Institute document only in that Aal al-Bayt offered a core base of signatories and helped in the networking needed to complete the document.

¶19. (C) Hlayyel, Abbadi and Jarrar all told Poloff that the responses to these kinds of efforts have come from numerous Christian denominations and have been overwhelmingly positive. Further efforts will be taken to strengthen Muslim-Christian relations with a view to expanding the efforts to Jewish religious leaders - some of whom replied in support of the message of "A Common Word." In an example of a tangible result from these efforts, five Muslim leaders, including the then-Director of the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center Aref Ali Nayed, met with five representatives of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican, agreed to form "The Catholic-Muslim Forum," and to organize the first seminar of the forum to be held in Rome on November 4-6, 2008, on the theme: "Love of God, Love of Neighbor." Responses from other Christian churches have also been positive.

The Great Tafsir Project

¶20. (SBU) Another key project under the Aal al-Bayt Institute umbrella is the "Great Tafsir Project." Note: "Tafsir" is the Islamic science of Quranic interpretation and explanation. End note. The project aims to be the most comprehensive on-line Quranic resource. Its website is already up and running, and boasts that it provides the original Arabic texts of more than 110 books of tafsir. It is unique in that it posts tafsirs from all eight schools of Islamic jurisprudence, as well as commentaries from other sources. The project claims to have transcribed the classical tafsirs word-by-word, and claims that its website is the most visited tafsir website in the world. Translations of the Qur'an in 18 languages are also available, as are resources related to other Quranic sciences such as recitation. The project is now working on translating some of the major tafsirs into English. Our interlocutors describe the project as important because it has been implemented in the context of the Amman Message's goals of promoting traditional and authentic scholarship, intra-Muslim theological tolerance, and access to complete and sound sources of Islamic jurisprudence, and as a way to make available genuine and traditional Islamic sources as tools with which to refute extremist ideology.

Comment

¶21. (C) The impact of the Amman Message and related efforts should not be overestimated. While the Hashemites have a role to play in international Islamic thought given their descent from the Prophet Muhammad, they are not as influential as other key, wealthy states such as Saudi Arabia. That said, the impressive efforts of the Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and the support given to it, and its concerted efforts at promoting moderate, traditional and authentic Islam, are noteworthy. It has brought a diverse range of Islamic thinkers, from throughout the Islamic world and across the full spectrum of Islamic thought, from Salafi to Sufi, together in agreement on several core issues. While these agreements among scholars might not tip potential extremists onto the moderate side of the fence in the short term, sustained reinforcement of the messages inherent in the Amman Message through training the next generation of imams, effective use of media and the internet, and ensuring that the themes of the Amman Message are propagated in Islamic schoolbooks, will benefit the forces of moderation within Islamic societies.

The Links

¶22. (SBU) The Amman Message has its own dedicated website and it is linked to and featured prominently on all Government of Jordan websites. The Amman Message website and its related websites listed below are all administered by the Aal al-Bayt Institute. The websites of note related to Aal al-Bayt or the Amman Message are:

-The Amman Message and Amman Interfaith Message:
www.ammannmessage.com

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-Aal al-Bayt Institute: www.aalalbayt.org

-A Common Word (Open Letter from Muslim to Christian Leaders): www.acommonword.com

-Great Tafsir Project: www.altafsir.com

-Islamica Magazine: www.islamicamagazine.com

The preceding websites tend to be heavily linked with one another, and are a key method for propagating the Amman Message and its related efforts.

Visit Amman's Classified Web Site at
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/ammen/>

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